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*S. Elizabeth Richardson. 4
from her brother
James.*

A

SERMON

OCCASIONED BY THE DESTRUCTION

OF

PENNSYLVANIA HALL,

AND DELIVERED THE LORD'S DAY FOLLOWING,

MAY 20, 1838,

IN THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH,

BY THE PASTOR.

PRINTED, NOT PUBLISHED.

PHILADELPHIA:

PRINTED BY JOHN C. CLARK, 60 DOCK STREET

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SERMON.

ACTS v. 38, 39. If this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it.

I RISE to address you this morning, brethren and friends, under a peculiar sense of duty, and with pain and sorrow. For, were it not for the state of feeling which the occurrences of the past week have disclosed, I could not have believed that there existed among the intelligent and well informed portions of this community such a deep and wide insensibility, I say not only to the iniquity, but to the utter absurdity of attempting to put down obnoxious sentiments by popular violence. It is true, similar outrages have been perpetrated, within a few years, in other parts of our country, and they awakened but little feeling here. And the reason, I supposed, was, that they happened at a distance, beyond the immediate circle of our observation and sympathy. But now the evil has come close to us—to our very doors. The whole city has been illuminated by the glare of the incendiary's torch. And what is the state of the public mind? What is the tone of sentiment almost universally expressed? Why, with a few faint professions of regret at the manner in which that Hall has been destroyed, are mingled words of hearty satisfaction and triumph over its ruins. "We are sorry that it was done in such a way, but we are glad it is done." This is what we hear on all sides. And this disposition to overlook the cha-

racter and tendency of the means for the sake of the end, to justify a misguided and lawless multitude, to contemplate acts of popular violence, without alarm, and even with satisfaction, this false and ignorant reliance upon brute force, in conflict with opinion, is by far the most alarming circumstance of the recent outrage. My friends and fellow citizens cannot know what a brink they are approaching, what a doctrine they are sanctioning, to what scenes of despotism and anarchy the present state of public sentiment, if not speedily and thoroughly corrected, must lead. Our acquiescence in such disorderly and violent methods, is a virtual rejection of all Law, and a surrender of life, person, property, and every precious right of the individual, to a wild irregular authority, subject to the blindest impulses, to the most savage delusions, that will rule us with a rod of iron, destroying every feeling of security, and extinguishing among us the last spark of personal freedom.

It is melancholy and discouraging to observe how very vague and imperfect, in this boasted nineteenth century, mens' notions are of freedom of thought and speech. In every age, in almost every year since the reformation, the world has resounded with eloquent appeals in behalf of civil and religious liberty. The doctrine of mental freedom has been powerfully set forth in words, if that were all. But it has almost always turned out at last, that the zealous advocates of freedom of mind, have contended, not for the sake of the great principles of liberty in all their length and breadth, but in order to secure a hearing for themselves, for their own private opinions; and when this end has been accomplished, their ardour in the cause of freedom has vanished, and they have been as willing as their predecessors to impose restrictions upon thought and speech. They have sought freedom not for the mind itself, not as the inherent and inalienable right of the mind, but only for their own private convictions. So often has this been the case, that now-a-days, whenever an individual pleads for liberty, for the right of free discussion, it is in-

stantly inferred that he is the partisan of certain obnoxious sentiments; that he speaks to subserve the particular interests of some sect or party, otherwise he would not be so zealous in the cause of human rights, and every thing like a pure love of liberty, for liberty's sake, apart from the promotion of any peculiar opinions, is so very rare. I am aware, that you will suppose, now, that I am speaking in especial behalf of those whose doctrines and measures have occasioned these disgraceful and most alarming acts of violence. But, if I know myself, this is not my present purpose. Whether the Abolitionists are right or wrong, is, comparatively speaking, a small question now. Your dearest liberties, the security of your property and your lives, and, above all, your sacred rights as the intelligent and accountable creatures of God, whose privilege and whose duty it is to think and speak each for himself, upon his own sure and incommunicable responsibility; these have been struck at and violated in their persons, and it is in behalf of these, our common liberties, that I would now speak. To the general insensibility to this gross violation, I would awaken your most earnest attention.

I know what plea is urged in justification of this insensibility. It is said, that the individuals, who assembled in that Hall, had defied public opinion, and outraged public feeling by their language and their measures. Let it be granted for a moment, that they had done so, that a fair case existed for the strong expression of the public disapprobation. Only the more urgent was the necessity, that the offended sense of the community should be vindicated in no violent or irregular way. If the feeling which kindled that conflagration was right, the more important was it that it should be rightly expressed. If, because the impulse, from which the populace acted, was true and justifiable, you justify also the acts to which that impulse prompted, you embolden the people to take the law into their own hands in other and more questionable cases. You give currency and sanction to the idea, not only that they are to decide, as they may and must, what

is to be permitted and what forbidden, but that the process by which error and falsehood are to be suppressed, is also a matter for their extemporaneous decision. Let it be admitted, that the end they have accomplished was good, and in consideration of that, that the method also was right, you instantly make them your lawgivers and magistrates, and they will be swift and terrible to discharge the office to which you have virtually appointed them. A government of laws, wisely framed, extensively promulgated, and regularly administered, is in fact disclaimed. It becomes obsolete, and instead thereof, we have the popular will erected into a supreme and summary tribunal, and what a fearful form of society have we then! It is no form of society at all, but a chaos. The popular mind must be educated up to a point far beyond what the world has yet witnessed, it must be baptized into the spirit of justice and virtue, before it will cease to be liable to the grossest mistakes and delusions, to the most rash and bloody-minded impulses, hurrying it away to outrages which the next moment it will deplore and weep over in vain. As things are, we see every day how wofully misinformed the public may be, what baseless rumours are credited and acted upon as facts. How often has it happened in the history of the world, that the multitude, in a moment of false excitement, have been driven to shed the blood of their best friends and benefactors. The very next hour their eyes have been opened, and the objects of their fatal violence have become the objects of their greatest veneration. But they cannot retrieve what they have done. They can only canonize the martyr, and pile up blocks of marble to his memory. I might refer to many instances and most illustrious ones, but I will mention only one, one that to us, my brethren, should be peculiarly significant. A more kindly sympathy with humanity, a more ardent desire for its well-being never dwelt in a human bosom than that which glowed in the heart of Priestley. But by a popular delusion, his dwelling, with the fruits of years of intellectual labour, was given to the flames, and he was driven from his native land.

Such have been the results when the people, deserting their constituted authorities and established laws, have been given over to their own wild rule. It is worse, a thousand times worse, than a despotism: for the character and policy of a despot may come to be known, and his subjects may conduct themselves accordingly. The most capricious tyrant has a law, even in his caprices, to which those who are under him may learn, in time, to conform themselves. But who shall undertake to tell when and in what direction the excited passions of a misinformed populace may be urged to acts of violence and blood? We know not how the most innocent word uttered, here or elsewhere, in public or private, may be caught up, and misinterpreted, and perverted, and magnified, until it draws down upon our defenceless heads, the popular indignation. All feeling of security, in such a state of things, must vanish. All personal freedom of thought and speech will be given to the winds. Even silence and caution will become suspicious, and our spirits must be abject indeed, if life does not become utterly worthless. In fact, men have never yet been able to endure such a condition of society for any length of time. They have hailed the appearance of any one man who would rule them, according to his own selfish and ambitious will, as a blessing; they have fled to the shadow of the despot's throne as a refuge from themselves. Things among *us* have not come to this pass yet; but if there is any one indication of a downward tendency in this people from the lofty elevation of freedom, upon which they have hitherto proudly stood among the nations, it is the insensibility to the value and authority of the established laws, which has been disclosed upon more than one recent occasion. Political and religious subjects lie close to the interests and passions of the people; and the temples of religion, and your temples of wealth, may be wrapt in flames, which no man shall dare to lift a finger to quench.

We make our boast, in the fair fabric of society, which has been reared on these shores—and it is fair and beautiful—but

we are apt to think that it cannot be overthrown: to look for its continuance out of ourselves. Herein is the fatal delusion. Precious blood has been spilt in building up this nation; and noble men have toiled to make it what it is. But not for these—not for these, not for any reason on earth, or in heaven, will God violate his own laws, and continue a free form of government to those who have lost a free spirit. No man can estimate the loss which we are already suffering in the respect and sympathy of the world at large. We are furnishing despotism with arguments, most potent arguments, against us; and in multitudes of minds, on the other side of the ocean, the capacity of man for self-government, must continue still longer questionable. In the holy name of Freedom, if the word retains any meaning for you, rally to recall your departing honours. Awake from your false security. If there be no other way, organize yourselves into associations for the defence of the laws; and resolutely determine to secure their full protection to the acknowledged rights of thought and speech, even when in the exercise of these rights, individuals have been led to form and express opinions most repugnant to our own.

It seems to be thought by some, that these cruel and ruthless outbursts of popular feeling are justifiable, inasmuch as extravagant, fanatical and disorganizing sentiments ought to be put down at once, and they can be put down in no other way. Christianity abhors the thought. Her doctrine is, “Resist not evil with evil: but overcome evil with good;” and the doctrine is founded in the nature of things; force never was, it never can be, an argument against opinion. To seek to frighten and silence a man, is to take the surest way to increase his confidence in the correctness of his convictions: for it convinces him that you have nothing in reason to advance against them. Besides, extremes invariably and inevitably produce extremes. When, instead of replying to a man’s arguments, you put a torch to his house, or threaten his person with violence, you awaken in him a keen sense of

injustice; and this inflames his mind, and its action is likely to become heated and diseased; and since he can show his scorn of you in no other way, he repays your violence with a more violent and unguarded expression of his opinions. You awaken in him a spirit which you may break, but it will not bend. You do your best to drive it into all sorts of extravagance.

If he is right, and he feels that he is right, you are taking the surest method to inspire him with a superhuman, divine strength. As you wound his body, and annoy his outward condition, you animate the soul that is in him; and from the injustice and oppression around him, he turns to the great and good of the past, and associates himself in imagination with them, and joins himself to the noble company of the apostles and martyrs. From the violence of the world he appeals to the justice of heaven, and justly accounts his sufferings as the appointments of God, whereby God is to be served and glorified; and you find at last, that you have aroused the holiest and mightiest feeling of the soul; that when you thought to silence, and crush, and annihilate, you have kindled an unquenchable flame, that cannot fail to spread and catch: so close and strong are the sympathies that bind man to man. Hence has arisen the proverb, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." And hence too, appears the glaring absurdity of thinking to suppress obnoxious opinions by violence. The persecuted, if they have the feelings, the spirit of men, have all that spirit awakened within them by persecution, and their sufferings, their privations, and their blood, speak trumpet-tongued to the hearts of others, and muster around them a host of defenders and friends.

Even if their opinions are erroneous and wild, the brute force with which they are met only tends, as I have said, to exasperate and drive them into still greater extravagances. It is not to be doubted, that the means, which have been taken to suppress thought, have tended directly and powerfully to produce the most monstrous errors. Intimidate, denounce, and persecute, and in a mere spirit of defiance men will per-

sist in thinking for themselves, and strive to irritate and shock you by the boldness of their thoughts. You will only provoke them to embrace and advance error in mere scorn of your efforts to silence them. There is in the heart, a consciousness of its own inborn freedom, which can never be annihilated; (blessed be God that it cannot!) and which, if not freely tolerated, will break forth in the wildest forms. It is in vain for us to shut our eyes to these facts in the human constitution, to which all history bears witness. "There *is* a spirit in man, and the inspiration of God hath given him understanding;" and he can never wholly cease to feel its sacredness, and its rights; and certainly one way to make him feel them the most deeply is, to deny him the liberty of thought. The torch with which you menace him awakens him from the sleep of the soul, and shines into the depths of his own nature; and he is aroused to a sense of his own power as a moral and intellectual being. Men, who never thought before, will begin to exercise the divine right the instant you undertake to question it; and the more violent you are, the more earnest and vehement will they become. They will start the most extravagant conclusions sooner than they will permit it to be doubted whether they have a right to think at all.

On the other hand, acknowledge freely and fully the freedom of the mind, and the right of every one to form and express his own serious opinions. Let the least and lowest be fully protected in the exercise of this right, and you will take away one main inducement to extravagance and fanaticism. Then there will be no laurels to be gained, no reputation for courage and boldness to be won, in the formation and expression of opinions, when it is insisted that every man may, and every man *ought* to think for himself; that he does no more than his simple, inevitable duty, when he avows his own honest convictions, no matter how much they vary from those of others. Then men will think, not for the sake of defying your opposition, and braving the authority you usurp over them, but for the sake of truth, to discover and know what is

true and right in opinion and conduct. In a word, it is the attempts that have been made to impede the action of the mind, to throw restrictions and discouragements in the way of its growth, that have forced it out into numberless and unseemly excesses. On the contrary, take off all chains, seek not to use intimidation and force, let it be encircled by the atmosphere and the light of freedom, and it will grow up in truth and strength.

I pray you, my hearers, give heed to these things, and let them not be mere speculations, but the lights that guide and regulate us in our speech, our judgments, and our conduct. Frown upon the slightest disposition to fetter the freedom of the mind, for in that is our life and our salvation. No matter how opposite to yours another man's opinions may be, if it be attempted to put him to silence by fear and force; make his case your own, instantly, I beseech you, and feel that your dearest right may be violated in him. As you believe him to be in error, as you desire his conversion, treat him with all possible fairness. Reverence the sacredness of your own freedom in him; and do not, by violence, drive him still farther into error, and render his return hopeless. We, of this land, are placed in new and unprecedented circumstances. We stand in peculiar and direct relation to the public weal. Every man here is a component part of the public power, and we have a social duty to discharge that we cannot throw off. Every thing depends upon universal education, upon every man's studying, understanding, and obeying the great principles of human liberty, upon which the general welfare rests. Is it your *right*? Nay, it is your imperative and solemn *duty* to judge and decide for yourselves on all questions of public interest. Neglect this duty, and you put in peril the prospects of your children, and the liberties of the country, and the best hopes of the world are betrayed. Or if we will not think for ourselves, let us at least not hinder others in the discharge of this great obligation.

I pray God to sanctify recent events to our warning and instruction, to make the light of the late conflagrations a memento and a beacon, startling us from our slumbers, and creating in us a new and governing sense of our rights and our duties. There are thousands throughout this land upon whom it will have this effect. You may allow one house to burn while all the surrounding edifices are preserved. But the moral flame which has been kindled cannot be so restricted and confined. Men are bound together by imperishable sympathies. "As in water, face answereth to face, so does the heart of man to man." We are "like tuned strings, strike one string, and all strings will begin sounding." May God make us true to our human sympathies, to His everlasting law, and to that spark of his own divinity, that life within us, which is his richest gift, and whose birthright is freedom!

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